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Panel seeks solutions to revive state's moribund Arts Council

By Mike Boehm, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

The state agency that boosts the arts by handing out government grants has crumbled to its foundation in California's ongoing budget crisis. On Monday, arts leaders gathered at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion to survey the damage and to begin trying to awaken public support for a political push to rebuild.

But the success of any effort to restore the California Arts Council from gutted shell to stable governmental edifice will depend on whether Gov.-elect Arnold Schwarzenegger is willing to increase the allotment for the arts. He campaigned on a theme of widespread spending reductions to bridge the state's multibillion-dollar deficit.

The Arts Council was, in terms of the budget, a minor consideration in Sacramento even before last summer's deficit-driven cuts brought it near extinction. The allocation from the state's general fund fell from \$17.5 million to \$1 million, leaving California last in the nation in per capita state government arts spending.

State Sen. Jack Scott (D-Altadena), who chairs the Joint Legislative Committee on the Arts, convened the hearing in Los Angeles in hopes of drawing attention to the near-demise of the California Arts Council. The panel also took testimony on how the cuts have damaged nonprofit arts groups and threatened the arts' benefits to youth and the state's broader economy. Scott proposed that the governor and Legislature restore Arts Council funding to \$17.5 million in next year's budget.

Scott said that he, like other arts supporters, was shocked when angry budget negotiations between Gov. Gray Davis and his Republican opponents in the Legislature yielded just \$1 million for the arts, a token amount needed to secure a matching federal grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.

"I don't think that was an indication that nobody cared about the arts," Scott said, "but that the picture wasn't fully painted" to show legislators why arts funding should be preserved. The task now, he said, is for the arts constituency to paint that picture vividly during the budgeting process that begins in January, when Schwarzenegger must submit his spending plan for the 2004-05 fiscal year.

Late in the recall campaign, The Times submitted written questions to Schwarzenegger about his positions on arts funding. His e-mailed replies did not specify how much he thinks the state should spend. "I know how important the arts are to our culture and our

economy," he said. "However, we need to assess the magnitude of the deficit in order to see what level of public funding could be provided. We need to find new ways for California to fund the arts in our state budget, and the governor needs to provide leadership."

Schwarzenegger said he would not dismantle the California Arts Council. He proposed more vigorous marketing of special arts license plates that generate about \$900,000 a year.

The consequences of leaving state arts funding where it is now are severe, and they fall disproportionately on rural counties where small local arts agencies nurtured by the Arts Council are leading programming providers, said Barry Hessenius, the Arts Council director appointed by Davis nearly four years ago.

Hessenius says that he and his staff have prepared a report for the governor-elect, spelling out past Arts Council programs and the effect of budget cuts. Meanwhile, he said, it's now or never for the kind of lobbying effort that hasn't materialized in the past.

Being last in state arts funding is "a national embarrassment," he said. "This is a state where creativity drives the economy, and we're sending a message saying, 'We don't [care].' If the public thinks it's important, they'd better say something."

At Monday's hearing, state Sen. Sheila Kuehl (D-Santa Monica) said California arts partisans need a gloves-off approach.

"Advocates in other areas are fierce and sometimes rude, and it works," Kuehl said, and arts backers tend to take a more genteel approach to lobbying. "It's not just playing nice. We have to be aggressive and insistent, because we lost a great deal of ground."

Scott, one of the California Legislature's leading arts advocates, says it's unrealistic to look for any tax-driven solutions for the arts in Sacramento, where legislative Republicans have drawn a line against tax increases. A proposal is afoot among Democrats in the state Assembly to boost this year's state arts spending from \$1 million to \$7.5 million with an as-yet-unspecified fee on some arts-related commodity, such as video rentals or movie tickets.

It would take a two-thirds majority in each chamber to pass, which means a need for bipartisan support. "Unfortunately, I think it would be dead on arrival," he said.

Instead, Scott is looking to the coming budget process to regain what has been lost. Hence Monday's hearing, in which testimony was taken from arts leaders including Los Angeles Philharmonic president Deborah Borda; John Emerson, chairman of the board of the Music Center; and Charles "Chip" McNeal, manager of the San Francisco Ballet's educational wing.

"I'm not going to make a prediction that this hearing will suddenly create a huge infusion

of funds," said Scott, former president of Pasadena City College. "But this is where you have to start, getting people aware, making them willing to lobby and make a point. Those in the arts are not by nature trained in political lobbying. I think they're awakening. We all tend to awaken when something we feel deeply about is threatened."